

# MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church & Society REPORT

Report #17

November, 1977

## FOCUS ON THIRD WORLD WOMEN

The Task Force on Women in Church and Society believes that it is important for North American women to become aware of the concerns of women throughout the world. Why? (1) We are enriched through contacts with cultures outside our own. We can learn much from Third World women that can contribute to our own development. (2) If liberation is more than a personal experience, we should be concerned about forces that are hindering other people from achieving their full potential. We need to inform ourselves of the impact of U.S. and Canadian foreign and economic policies on the lives of Third World women and men. (3) We also need to examine the effect of the programs and policies of MCC and Mennonite mission boards on women in the Third World. Over 400 MCC volunteers are serving in developing countries. (4) Exposure to Third World issues can heighten our awareness that privilege and status are distributed largely on the basis of power.

In some respects North American women share several things in common with Third World women. The definition of who we are has too often been defined by others. Women have been told that they are weak, subordinate, inferior. Stereotypes are perpetuated and used to legitimize social inequities. The poor, women and minorities are blamed for their plight. Often the victimized group comes to believe the stereotypes. As one sociologist put it, "Constant reiteration of one's inferiority must often lead to its acceptance as a fact."

Although there are commonalities among women, we must remember that we are North Americans who possess power and privilege in the world community. We have not been labelled "underdeveloped." It is this difference that Pat Hostetter Martin touches on in her article in this Report. The following article by Luann Habegger Martin is an introduction to some of the issues which concern Third World women. --LHM

*Former Task Force member, Luann Habegger Martin helped to focus, write and collect materials for this issue.*

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## BEYOND OUR BORDERS

*Author's Note: This summer I, along with three other women, analyzed the transcripts of interviews with 123 women in six countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Kenya, Mexico, Sri Lanka and Sudan. The interviews were with rural, urban, educated and uneducated women. Perdita Huston, the journalist who interviewed the women*

*as part of an assignment with the United Nations, taped the conversations and donated a copy of the transcripts to the International Center for Research on Women in Washington, D.C. Most of this article is based on the themes that emerged in the interviews.*

If you were asked the question, "Is your life better or easier than your mother's?", how would you reply? Over half of the 28 Third World women who answered the question felt that their life was worse, the primary reason being the high cost of living. In response to the question, "How does your life differ from your mother's?", a rural Mexican woman said, "Despite advances, women still are poor." A rural woman in Sri Lanka also reflected on the dual nature of change:

Our land got distributed. Now our portion is very small. This is not sufficient for us to exist. Our mother's generation did not have all the opportunities that we have at the moment--mainly for education, health, transport, and so on. But economically, they were better off because the earlier generation got income that was sufficient to meet all their requirements. Because of the high cost of living since then, we aren't living a happy life. We find life hard.

Change is occurring at a rapid rate in the Third World. The cash economy, often ushering in high prices, has displaced subsistence farming and created hardships for women. Migration to the city has meant employment and new opportunities for some. Other city dwellers lament the lack of jobs and the loss of ownership and contact with the extended family. In the words of a Kenyan woman: "Some of the parents have neglected their older people which is very, very wrong in the African custom."

Today more women are employed away from their home or family lands. Several of the women interviewed commented on women's discontent with the traditional role. A Tunisian woman observed that "young girls used to be prepared exclusively for marriage. This used to be the goal of all young girls. Now the goal has changed. Girls want to go to school, learn a trade, and support their needs." Attitudes toward employed women are also changing. In Sri Lanka "now lots of parents want their girls to work because of the extra money needed."

On the whole women found changes in the areas of education, political-legal rights, health and social participation to be beneficial. When women spoke positively about change, their remarks were usually related to improvements in their standard of living or social gains. They could choose a career, a husband, a contraceptive. They could vote and play a more active, visible role in their community. Change to a middle-aged, uneducated rural woman in Tunisia meant expanded choices and opportunities and an improved self-image. She said, "Before it was practically the life of a beast that we led. Today, thanks to God, all women are liberated. The woman who wants to go somewhere only has to put on her veil and go; nobody bothers anyone else."

Kenyan women, unlike Tunisian women, were not confined to the home in the past. They were intricately linked to their tribe's subsistence economy. Their economic independence was undermined when cash crops, land rights and technology were placed in the hands of men. One woman said, "My mother had more choices. She was a farmer, had seven children and a lot of money." Quoting another woman, "Modern life is very difficult. You go to school and learn. After leaving the school, you find it very difficult to find a job. And even if you want to buy a dress, it is too expensive."

The negative impact of modernization on women is evident in other countries. Traditionally, women in Nigeria were responsible for pressing palm oil and pounding corn and pepper. When grinders, presses and mills were introduced, men were trained to use them. Less than 10 percent of the women own the corn mills. What seems to be happening is that women are still expected to provide for the basic needs of their family but are being denied access to resources that could help them meet these needs. Development strategies that perceive women as marginal to the economy jeopardize women's ability to provide for themselves."

Another theme that occasionally comes up is the role of religion in women's lives. A few women said that religion gives them strength. Others, however, were not so positive. Mexican women often mentioned the priest's opposition to family planning. A rural Mexican woman said that she attended mass regularly but would not go to confession because she would have to confess that she was using the pill. She feared that the priest would tell her to leave the church. A Tunisian woman said that her husband objected to her using a contraceptive for religious reasons. "He says it isn't normal to avoid a life that you are destined to live. He says I am like a chicken with a certain number of eggs to lay. It would be a sin not to lay them." This forty-year-old woman had given birth to ten children. Despite her husband's attitude, she got an IUD.

Religion has shaped women's self-image. An Egyptian woman referred to the inferior status of women. She noted that men must wash their hands before prayer if they have shaken hands with a woman. A woman in Sri Lanka believes that "The woman is born because she made a thousand sins in the previous world. A man can do anything he wants and escape. Some women said that they wished they had been born a boy because of the privileges men have. According to the women these privileges

include mobility, less work and responsibilities, and more education, power and authority. The story of the Black Prince in Sri Lanka may illustrate why women place so much emphasis on mobility. As tradition has it, women should not go out after 6 p.m. because the Black Prince and his devils are roaming around. However, if the woman is accompanied by a man, even a male baby, she will be protected.

The overall impression one has after reading the transcripts is that these women are of strong character. They feel responsible for their family's economic welfare. They want society to provide them with an opportunity to earn an income. As a means of dealing with their economic problems, women want an education that includes training in agricultural techniques, marketing, business management, handicrafts and technical skills. Women are also concerned that children receive the education, training and skills that they will need to get a good job. If girls are to achieve the same educational level as boys, past experience indicates that parental support, particularly from the father, is important. In referring to their own education, women spoke of the predominant influence of their father.

Perdita Huston recalls her conversation with a rural Mexican woman who was making tortillas as she was interviewed. Perdita asked the woman if boys and girls should have the same education. Her response was that girls should have more. "If children are ignorant, how can the future be good?", she asked the interviewer. This brings to mind an African proverb: "Educate a man and you educate one person; educate a woman and you educate a nation."

*Luann Habegger Martin will complete her course work in December for a masters degree in international development. In January she will be moving to Ghana where she plans to write her thesis on the impact of development on Ghanaian women.*

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## WHAT NORTH AMERICAN FEMINISTS HAVE TO LEARN FROM THIRD WORLD WOMEN

Having lived in Vietnam for five years, I feel my experiences there helped to raise my feminine consciousness as well as to subsequently temper my views on "women's liberation." I think the experience that really focused my thoughts, however, was a women's conference that I attended in Vancouver, B.C., in 1971 where North American women met together with women from Indochina to discuss women and their role in society. Because of my ability to speak Vietnamese, I found myself in the role of interpreter between North American women who had many individual demands and complicated needs and the women of Indochina who perceived their own individual needs to be subordinate to the needs of the society as a whole.

I soon discovered that translating words was not always sufficient for understanding to take place. The gap in experience between the North American and the Indochinese women was tremendous. For instance, one vocal group of lesbians wanted to ask the Indochinese women questions such as: "Do women live together/sleep together in your countries?" The obvious answer to anyone who has lived in a Third World country like Vietnam was, "Yes, of course the women live and sleep together. They do it from childhood until marriage." When I tried to explain in Vietnamese what the North American women had in mind, the Indochinese delegation answered with an embarrassed silence. They later made it clear that they felt that their

liberation was taking place as they struggled together with the men to liberate their society from an imperialist domination by the United States.

In Western societies, individual identity and individual rights are considered all-important. By way of contrast, in most Third World countries, children grow up thinking of themselves not so much as individuals as part of a larger unit--be it family, clan, tribe or village. This socialization has enabled many women in developing countries to participate fully in a larger revolutionary struggle. It has also enabled them to see more clearly what the struggle must be directed against.

Because of our socialization in individualism, some North American feminists want to define the "enemy" in personal terms--my father, my husband, sometimes being translated all men. Third World women involved in revolutionary struggles understand that the real "enemy" is the large corporate structures--the monied institutions, the multinational corporations. It is such institutions that thwart efforts to bring about a global community where political, economic and social rights can be extended to all people.

This ability to view the world from a perspective larger than one's own individual right is one important lesson to be learned from Third World women, an idea that isn't really very foreign to those of us who have grown up within the Christian tradition.

*Pat Hostetter Martin served with MCC in Vietnam. She lives in Phoenixville, Pa.*

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## RELATED RESOURCES

Boserup, Ester. Women's Role in Economic Development. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970. The "classic" in the field.

Elmendorf, Mary Lindsay. Nine Mayan Women: A Village Faces Change. Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1976.

Giele, Janet, and Audrey C. Smock, eds. Women and Society in International and Comparative Perspective. New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1976.



Huston, Perdita. Third World Women Speak Out: Change, Development and Basic Needs. This book, based on the interviews Luann Habegger Martin used for her article in this issue, will be published later this year by the Overseas Development Council, 1717 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20036.

MCC Development Monograph Series. See especially Luann Habegger Martin's monograph on Women and Development and Doris Janzen Longacre's monograph on Nutrition and Development. Copies are available from MCC.

Paulme, Denise, ed. Women of Tropical Africa. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.

Pescatello, Ann. Female and Male in Latin America: Essays. University of Pittsburg Press, 1973.

Sullerot, Evelyne. Woman, Society, and Change. New York: Mc-Graw Hill, 1971.

Tinker, Irene and Michele Bo Bransen, eds. Women and World Development. Washington, DC: Overseas Development Council, 1976. Twelve essays as well as summaries of the workshops of the "Women in Development" seminar held in 1976 in Mexico City as part of International Women's Year.

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#### LETTERS

Dear Gayle:

A response to the newsletter's issue on rape:

In the kitchen a Mennonite daughter  
found a man at a very late hour,  
As non-violence taught her  
she gave him cold water  
and thwarted him with the cold shower.

We who believe in non-violence are asked,  
"What would you do if . . ." and I must  
confess, should that if be sexual assault,  
my pink pacifism just might turn purple.

I believe we should face the reality that  
rape could happen to us and plan to use  
creative, assertive action in prevention  
and response. Strength of spirit will help  
us.

Sincerely,

*Barbara*  
Barbara Esch Shisler  
Telford, Pa.

Dear Friend:

I read with interest each issue of the  
"Report" and find it quite enlightening.

I do have a concern. It seems that the  
material presented in each issue is care-  
fully prepared and well written. However,  
after reading the material, I am at a loss  
to find a satisfying answer to women's con-  
cerns. The facts, as researched and printed  
are true. Yet, it appears to be information  
I could gather from reading any number of  
other publications--news magazines, health  
periodicals, law enforcement information,  
YMCA news letters, public library informa-  
tion sheets, psychology magazines, etc.

Would it be possible to approach these con-  
cerns from a more biblical perspective? I  
would like to see some solid thinking  
which includes the use of the Word of God.  
The Scriptures were given to us to benefit  
from in every area of our lives. Without  
the input of more biblical thinking, we  
just heap to ourselves more of the same  
the world has to offer.

I appreciate your efforts in behalf of women and men!

A sister,

*Kathryn M. Hunsberger*

Kathryn M. Hunsberger  
Meadville, Pa.

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#### NEWS

Six North American women representing the General Conference, the Mennonite Church, and the Mennonite Brethren Church, attended the first nationwide inter-Mennonite women's conference for India from November 1-6. Two hundred women were expected to attend the conference. Among the topics to be discussed were the role of women in the church and the Christian perspective on marriage. Martha Nickel from Saskatchewan directed the daily Bible study. Other North Americans attending the conference were Lois Deckert, Grace Friesen Slatter, Jocele Meyer, Katie Funk Wiebe, and Malinda Nikkel. Katie is a member of the MCC Task Force on Women.

The General Conference Mennonite Church is planning a Women and Development Conference to be held at the Faith Mennonite Church, Newton, KS, January 13-14. The focus will be on "The Adverse Impact of Development on Women," "Understanding the Place of Women in Developing Countries," "The Aspiration of Women in Third World Countries," "The Place of the Development Worker," and "Hospitality Across Cultures." Resource persons will be Dr. Cornelia B. Flora, associate professor of sociology and director of the Population Research Laboratory at Kansas State University, Doris Longacre, and Fremont and Sara Regier. For more information write to Herta Funk, General Conference Mennonite Church, 722 Main St., Box 347, Newton, KS 67114

ERA in troubled waters. 1977 is a disappointing year for the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment) in the United State. At the beginning of this year, sixteen states had yet to ratify the ERA. Of the number of states whose legislatures met during 1977, only Indiana passed the ERA. All the states whose legislatures met during 1977, with the exception of Illinois, have finished those sessions. Since many states legislatures meet every other year, this means that it will not be until 1979 before most states can reconsider the ERA. And the deadline for ratification is March 1979!

The ERA dates back to 1923, when it was first introduced by two Republican Congressmen from Kansas. It was introduced in every Congress until 1972 when it was passed. Three-fourths (38) of the state legislatures must ratify the ERA by March 22, 1979, before it becomes the 27th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. To date, 36 states have ratified the ERA. Those states which have not yet ratified the Amendment: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah and Virginia.

In Illinois the ERA passed by a simply majority in the House, which requires a 3/5 vote. Since the Illinois legislature is still in session, there is the possibility that the ERA can still be ratified there if another vote is taken.

A few of the above states will have legislative sessions in 1978. One of these is Virginia, where a controversial contest was fought this past spring. Other states which could meet are Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana and Mississippi. Florida could call a special session. Elections will be held in late 1978, and the composition of the state legislatures could change, especially if the ERA is an election issue. This would help lead toward ratification by two more states in late 1978 or early 1979. But it won't be easy!

Betsy Beyler, Washington, DC

"From an Associated Press story we learn that ERA is losing thanks to a women's prayer chain that persuaded the Lord to tip his power against that Equal Rights Amendment," writes Martin Marty in Context, a commentary on religion and culture.

"Said an organizer in Raleigh: 'We had women praying all night and all day . . . . We asked God that if this thing

was not in his plan that he would see that it was defeated.' She phoned women to pray: 'Not one woman said she wouldn't be willing to set her alarm and get out of bed and get down on her knees.' When North Carolina voted down the amendment, Mrs. Norma Swanson said, 'We feel the vote was a direct answer to prayer.' It's always good to know where God stands."

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## VERBS

. . . Esther Olfert, MCC volunteer in Brazil, offers a ten-week course in nutrition and cooking to women in the rural community of Orobo. "My desire in teaching nutrition-cooking classes is to help the women improve the daily diet of their families and to help them develop a greater sense of self-worth."

. . . Kathrine Baerg, (Winnipeg) and Sally Smith (Rochester, NY) are working with a small women's cooperative in Bangladesh. The women make botnis (prayer mats). Although the cooperative has only 11 members, MCCers Kathrine and Sally are encouraged. In the first place, getting the project started was no easy task in a Muslim community where women are kept in seclusion. Wives must receive permission from their husband before leaving the house. Secondly, the proceeds from the mat sales provide income that is often crucial to family survival.

. . . Jan Swartzendruber was the 1977 first place winner in a national competition for undergraduates sponsored by the Association of Educators of Journalism. The title of her forty-page paper was "An Ethic for Communication in International Development." One section of the paper evaluated MCC's application of communication principles in overseas development. Jan is presently enrolled in a masters program in international communication at American University, Washington, DC.

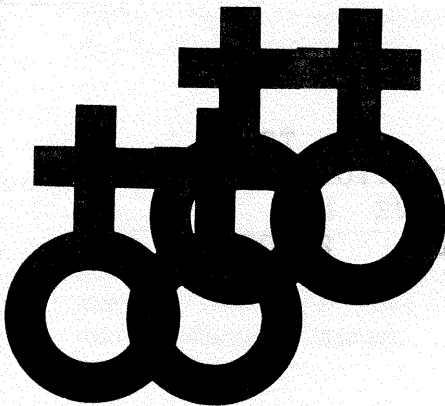
. . . Betsy Beyler was a member of an MCC delegation that visited Vietnam this fall. The purpose of the visit was to see how MCC assistance is being used, discuss possible future assistance, visit church people, and maintain contacts in some of the former MCC locations. Betsy is the assistant director of the MCC Peace Section Washington office.

## WORLD CONFERENCE TRAVEL FUND FOR WOMEN

Mennonite women's organizations are trying to raise \$10,000 to bring Third World women to the Mennonite World Conference which will be held in Wichita, KS, in July, 1978. The World Conference will match the \$10,000. The fund will make it possible for 13 to 14 women (Japan, 2; Indonesia, 2; Brazil, 1; Argentina, 1; Columbia, 1; Puerto Rico, 1; Honduras, 1; Africa, 4-5) to attend the conference. Make checks payable to World Conference Travel for Women and mail to MCC, 21 S. 12th St., Akron, PA, 17501 or MCC (Canada), 201-1483 Pembina Highway, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3T 2C8.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_



. . . Joyce Bratton is travelling throughout the U.S. and Canada to talk with women's groups about involvement with MCC in thrift shop self-help programs and material aid donations. Joyce has served with MCC for 20 years with assignments in Akron, PA; Holland and Zaire.

. . . Bertha Beachy, with the Mennonite Board in Eastern Africa, is involved in a literacy program for Somalis in Kenya. Recently she prepared several lectures on Islamic women for an Islam in Africa Panel Seminar. (She included some reflections on single women in mission in Muslim settings.) Bertha has also written a devotional booklet, "Freedom and Responsibility in the Church" for Mennonite Church women.

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#### NOTICE

Address changes and additions to the MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society Report should be mailed to:

	MCC Peace Section	
	21 S. 12th St.	
	Akron, PA 17501	

The Report is a bi-monthly publication of the MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society. Correspondence should be sent to Gayle Gerber Koontz, Editor, 27 Fairlawn St., Everett, MA 02149.

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